

Washington University Law Review

Volume 1959 | Issue 2

1959

Review of "Defending and Legally Establishing the Good News," By Hayden C. Covington

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Recommended Citation

Philip Perlmutter, *Review of "Defending and Legally Establishing the Good News," By Hayden C. Covington*, 1959 WASH. U. L. Q. 220 (1959).

Available at: https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/law_lawreview/vol1959/iss2/7

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BOOK REVIEWS

DEFENDING AND LEGALLY ESTABLISHING THE GOOD NEWS. By Hayden C. Covington. New York: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, Inc., 1950. Pp. 96.

The legal office of the Jehovah's Witnesses is as busy as it ever has been and indicates, according to its general counsel, "that the devil has not let up." Indeed, few religious groups have battled the devil as hard as the Jehovah's Witnesses and certainly none, because of it, have so furthered the cause of religious liberty. They have done it with militant religiosity and martyr-like indifference to riots, scorn, abuse and statutory regulation.

To make matters even worse, police, pedestrians and residents have greeted them with everything from indifference to violence. The latter occurs not so much because of their missionizing techniques, but rather because of what their beliefs necessitate in the way of societal behavior and responsibility. For example, Jehovah's Witnesses will not vote or hold public office, serve in the armed forces in peace or war-time, join interfaith movements, salute the flag, allow a blood transfusion, and as a rule will not obey any man-made law which they consider a violation of God's law. Ironically enough, although they repudiate earthly governments, they readily utilize its courts to further their theology. Because of such legal action, they have helped forge much of modern constitutional and religious freedom.

The Jehovah's Witnesses are prodigious and determined workers. While in their hands and hearts they carry the good news, ready to transmit to all, in their pockets they carry what is probably one of the most unique guides to legal involvement—*Defending and Legally Establishing the Good News*. Past experience has taught them that not only is the devil continually alert to impede their work, but that their "opponents, the religious fanatics," will do everything possible to stop them, even if it means to "frame mischief by law," whereby police and other law enforcement officers force Witnesses to abandon their God-given service.

The Witnesses accept such opposition and oppression with prophetic inevitability and take courage in the Biblical revelation that "if they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you."¹ As with the apostle Paul, they are prepared to enter Caesar's courts. And so each Witness is advised to read and study the 96-page pamphlet, *Defending and Legally Establishing the Good News*.

The pamphlet takes the Witness on an intimate tour through his con-

1. John 15: 20.

stitutional rights and particularly the legal personalities, procedures, and actions he might encounter, including trial and imprisonment. By Biblical precept, moral encouragement and the legal advisement, the pamphlet comforts and strengthens the reader for what at best would seem a harrowing experience. "Jesus informs us that we need not be overly anxious or perturbed about such appearances," consoles the guide, "since the holy spirit will guide us." No matter what happens, an arrested Witness should "speak boldly," but never be "rude." Tongues are to be bridled in order to maintain tactfulness, and the apprehended is to be as "cautious as serpents and as harmless as doves."

The reader is actually taken into the police station, where he is advised that in the event charges are filed, he is not to argue, but to simply request: "(1) a copy of the complaint, information, summons or warrant and (2) a copy of the ordinance, by-law, statute or law. If the police cannot supply such, obtain them from the city clerk or other official to whom the police refer you. If you cannot get a copy, ask permission to copy the same yourself."

The step-by-step actions that the police can take and the suggested counteractions are clearly outlined, including the problem of whether or not to ask for a trial by jury (which is not advised).

Perhaps the most fascinating section deals with the preparation Witnesses should take for the trial. Some thirty-one questions are listed which might be asked them and which should never seem embarrassing to answer. For example, "Isn't it a fact that you did not attend a theological school before you became a minister? Isn't it a fact that you became a minister overnight and that you merely call yourself a minister without having prepared for the ministry? Don't you make a profit from the sale of this literature? Isn't it a fact that you are carrying on a hate campaign against other people's religion?"

Seemingly minor points, but vitally important for the Witnesses, are discussed—it is not a violation of "God's law" for them to stand up when the judge enters the courtroom or for them to take an oath to testify truthfully. Shades of Hamlet addressing his actors creep in—in pleading their case, they are to "speak conversationally, rather than oratorically. Speak loud enough to be heard, remembering that you are a minister. A minister should always talk loud enough to be heard, regulating his volume according to the size of the audience and the room where he is speaking." And, at the end of the case, the defendant is told to say, "'May it please the court, I have a motion which I desire to read and submit to the court.' Attempt to read the motion aloud. If this is not permitted, hand the motion to the judge and request him to file it with the papers and read it before deciding the case." Naturally, the pamphlet includes a sample motion to dis-

miss, which requires but the insertion of the names of the plaintiff and defendant.

Semantically, it is difficult to classify the Jehovah's Witnesses. They do not consider themselves a religious denomination in the usual sense, but rather "an association of men and women" who bear witness to God and Jesus. Basically, the Witnesses are "exclusively devoted to the Divine Sovereign of the Universe," who is about to introduce a "righteous new world," the exact time of which no one knows, but which nevertheless has been definitely scheduled. In fact, the present world is well on its way to the "appointed time of the end," which began in 1914. The end itself will come at the "Universal War of Armageddon," after which only a select number (estimated at 144,000) will be "counted worthy of being ushered into God's everlasting new world."

Guiding and directing the circulation of these beliefs is the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, whose main headquarters are in Brooklyn. The methods and materials used for proclaiming the "good news" are direct, primitive, and surprisingly effective. Through their own printing plants in different parts of the world, Witnesses publish Bibles, pamphlets, tracts, and periodicals. These are distributed by Witnesses, usually with a verbal sermon to whoever will listen, whether on a street corner, apartment house, or public park.

Over the years, because of their beliefs and techniques, Jehovah's Witnesses have been involved in scores of legal cases, most of which they have won. Although they interpret them as teleological evidence of the verity of their beliefs, the decisions themselves, of course, reflect the high and privileged position that the courts have placed upon the first amendment.

Perhaps the finest evaluation of the constitutional effects of the beliefs and actions of Jehovah's Witnesses was made by Justice Murphy in *Prince v. Massachusetts*, where he said: "The Jehovah Witnesses are living proof of the fact that even in this nation, conceived as it was in the ideals of freedom, the right to practice religion in unconventional ways is still far from secure. Theirs is a militant and unpopular faith, pursued with a fanatical zeal. . . . To them, along with other present-day religious minorities, befalls the burden of testing our devotion to the ideals and constitutional guarantees of religious freedom."²

Defending and Legally Establishing the Good News certainly puts to the test "the ideals and constitutional guarantees of religious freedom"³ in the militant pursuit of the Jehovah's Witnesses to establish their religious beliefs.

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2. 321 U.S. 158, 175-76 (1944) (dissenting opinion).

3. *Ibid.*

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